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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author/educator considers the influence of the composition scholar Dixie Goswami on his own professional career as a teacher of writing at Clemson University. The paper takes the author through his graduate studies and his attendance at summer institutes, pointing out that Dixie Goswami was always an inspiration to him and to his colleagues. Professor Goswami was responsible for the author's hiring at Clemson, and the paper discusses the university programs and community service projects in elementary school writing that he undertook there. The author/educator learned to put into practice key concepts by Dixie Goswami about teaching writing: constructing real audiences for writing; the importance of inquiry and research; cross-age tutoring practices; publication as an important end of the composition process; and how collaboration among schools, colleges, and community organizations can build an environment for students to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of others in the community. (NKA)

Dixie Goswami and Write to Change: Connecting Learners

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Telling you how Dixie Goswami has influenced my work, particularly my work with writing across the curriculum, is easy for me, because Dixie was there at the very beginning of my WAC career. Dixie and I first met in a hallway at a 4Cs meeting, I think it was, in the late 70s. She introduced me to her grandchild, Jeremy, then about five years old. As I came to realize later, Jeremy was the eighth child that Dixie was rearing, and as I also discovered later, it was not unusual to meet Dixie in the company of one or more of her seven children and ten grandchildren or even Jeremy's son, her great grand child, Angelo, all of whom live, work, and study in South Carolina. Dixie's personal life and her professional life are often brought together, whether in a Laguna tribal school in New Mexico, or at a professional conference in Minneapolis, or at a potluck social in her home in Clemson, South Carolina.

I remember well the first time Dixie influenced my WAC work, and even though initially the influence was indirect, it transformed every aspect of my professional life—as a teacher, a scholar, and an administrator. In the summer of 1977, my colleague Toby Fulwiler, at my suggestion, attended a three-week NEH summer institute in New Jersey.

In addition to Dixie, the institute was conducted, as I recall, by Lee Odell, Robert Parker, and Steve Zemmelman, among others. Janet Emig addressed the institute on "writing as a mode of learning." The purpose of the institute was to promote a new concept called "language and learning across the curriculum" and to introduce American educators to the work of British scholars and teachers: James Britton, Nancy Martin, and their colleagues. When Toby returned to Michigan Tech that summer full of enthusiasm, we and our colleagues set to work almost immediately, reading Britton and Martin's *The Development of Language Abilities 11-18*, and simultaneously writing a grant proposal that would launch Michigan Tech's writing-across-the-curriculum program. The program was built on principles and practices promoted by Dixie, Janet, and Lee at the summer institute: writing as tool for learning in a student-centered classroom, the composing process and the importance of revision, the centrality of inquiry-based learning, the importance of writing for a variety of purposes to a variety of audiences in a variety of contexts, and collaboration within classrooms, across disciplines, and into the wider community. That early influence has been reinforced many times over the past twenty-four years. Toby Fulwiler emailed me recently to say that Dixie had inspired him to pursue work in journals, a kind of writing that she, in particular, emphasized at that summer institute. "Quite clearly," Toby wrote, "Dixie changed the direction of my professional life." Like Toby and me, many teachers and scholars across the nation could make and have made such statements. Thus we are honored to celebrate Dixie Goswami today.

In the winter of 1987 Dixie visited us in Houghton, Michigan to give a talk and conduct a workshop. Once again, she would inspire me and affect the course of my

career and my life. During that visit, she asked me if I might be interested in applying for a new position that was just created at her institution, Clemson University. She was on the search committee that had designed a joint position between the College of Engineering and the College of Liberal Arts with the purpose of building collaborative projects in the area of communications. I eventually was offered and accepted that position, and one of the main reasons I did so, was the opportunity to work with Dixie, whom I had come to identify as a mentor and as an incredible talent and visionary. I've been thankful for that opportunity ever since.

During my first year at Clemson, with Dixie as my colleague, I became involved in her "Write to Change" projects as a community-resource person at the local elementary school, participating once a week in a fifth-grade class. These fifth graders were writing picture books on animals for second graders, whom they interviewed for the project. We took a research field trip to the Greenville Zoo, and we read many books about animals. The fifth graders wrote and published their books and a laminated copy of each book was presented to the school library. Each fifth-grade author received a copy as well and presented a copy and read it together with his or her second-grade partner. It was my first experience in an elementary classroom since I was a student there myself. And this time, I was a student again, learning how to put into practice key concepts that Dixie was teaching me about teaching writing: constructing real audiences for writing, the importance of inquiry and research, cross-age tutoring practices, publication as an important end of the composing process, and how collaborations among schools, colleges, and community organizations can build an environment for students to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of others in their community.

Dixie's advice and encouragement enabled me to teach my very first course at Clemson University, Advanced Technical Writing, a course I had not taught previously—and—using an approach--I had never before tackled so thoroughly. We read *Writing in Nonacademic Settings,* edited by Dixie and Lee Odell, but the heart of the course was a semester-long, collaborative, "real-world" project. At Dixie's request, we set about writing a user's manual for CUFAN, the Clemson University Forestry and Agriculture Network, an early and clunky e-mail and conferencing system that connected all of Clemson's agricultural extension offices. Dixie's idea was that because there was an extension office in every county in South Carolina, schools throughout the state could dial-up their local extension office using a modem and then send messages to any other school within the state without incurring prohibitively expensive long distance telephone charges. This would enable South Carolina students and teachers to link together for educational purposes. Funding had been secured for the printing and distribution of what would be a sixty-page manual, funding I later found out derived from one of Dixie's grants. Dixie visited our class and provided us with the rationale for the project and showed us the potential benefits by using student examples from Bread Net, the national electronic network established by her work with the Bread Loaf School of English and Rural Teacher Network. Dixie provided us not only with the purpose and audience for our project but with the motivation to do it and do it well. This project would make a difference in the lives of the students who used it to learn, to communicate, and to solve problems. It made a difference to those brave students in my project-based class, who tackled this project with gusto, rather than succumbing as one of the less brave students

did when he told me just before he dropped the course that he had registered to study and practice technical writing, not to actually do it.

We had no idea what challenges lay in store for us with this "real-world" project. In 1987, none of us in the class had ever used e-mail, not to mention the CUFAN system. Some of us were new to using computers at all. We visited schools to find out what kind of documentation students and teachers needed, and then we listened to the administrators of CUFAN at Clemson explain the kind of user's manual they wanted, that they could distribute to farmers and extension agents. These two audiences, the school audience and the CUFAN audience, agreed on very little. The schools wanted accessibility; Clemson administrators wanted standardization that was confusing and off-putting to student users. The schools used Apple computers and the CUFAN people used PCs. The CUFAN people wanted a manual for farmers and business people, their clientele. They told us explicitly to de-emphasize users who might be teachers and students, because they would be a minority of the users, and because it wasn't at all clear whether schools would really be able to incorporate telecommunications into instruction. On the other hand, the school people told us that they had given a $15,000 grant to the CUFAN people for the production of the manual--and—that the grant was even now paying for our class's computer time, and that they expected educational use to have a prominent role. So, in addition to learning the CUFAN system without the help of a user's manual, then writing directions, field testing, negotiating our multiple audiences, revising, writing some more, and eventually publishing our manual, we learned that what some perceive as the driest of academic subjects, technical writing--when placed in an authentic context--could be fraught with politics, conflict, and intrigue. Dixie, of course,

knew the pitfalls of project-based teaching and learning, but she also knew, and taught us that semester, that meaningful writing--the kind that makes a difference in people's lives--is embedded in very human and often very messy situations.

We also wanted to reflect on our educational experience in this project-based class, as Dixie also suggested we do, so we performed classroom-based research on our language use, our problem solving, our group dynamics, with pairs of students assigned to study and write up results of one such aspect of our collaborative experience. We used another of Dixie's books as a resource: *Reclaiming the Classroom: Teacher Research as an Agency for Change*. In doing so we learned the theoretical and rhetorical aims of technical writing not only from our scholarly reading and our participant-observer classroom ethnographies but from our immersion in the writing itself, in our collaboration itself, in the social and political context itself. With Dixie's guidance and a little luck, we not only completed the manual but negotiated what John Dewey called "the central problem of an education based upon experience," that is, "to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences." This context brought forth numerous stories from the students, and their storytelling became one of the most important insights of our classroom-based research—in which we were able to realize how we used narrative as a tool for learning, to put difficult problems into perspective, and perhaps most importantly, the create a collaborative community that worked to get the job done. At a holiday pot luck at Dixie and Bhuvenesh's home, I told Dixie that this was the most intense and invigorating and in some ways the most successful course I had ever taught. And Dixie smiled and said as many of you have

heard her say about projects of yours: "that's wonderful," and "you do such interesting work." If that be at all true, I say "thank you," Dixie.

Clemson University is fortunate to have an endowed center to support the work of "communication across the curriculum," the Pearce Center for Professional Communication. This Center is unique in key ways that owes much to Dixie Goswami. It was founded on three interrelated goals: the first goal is to promote communication-across-the-curriculum on campus, but it does not stop there, the second goal is to reach out to the schools in collaborative projects, and a third goal is to reach out to businesses and communities in collaborative projects. These three goals of the Pearce Center mutually reinforce and strengthen one another. Dixie's influence is everywhere to be seen in the conception and operation of the Center. How else could so many of us at Clemson learned to think, plan, and act so broadly and so humanely? Dixie Goswami is a national treasure, but for those of us fortunate enough to live and work with her in Clemson, she is a continual source of inspiration and strength, of courage and of love. Dixie, I salute you on this your special occasion, and I look forward to our next potluck dinner.

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